

THE MYSTERY OF GRASLOV

By Ashley Towne

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SYNOPSIS OF The Mystery of Graslov

CHAPTER I.—Prince Neslerov wants to marry Frances Gordon, the charming daughter of an American who is building the Transsiberian railroad. Frances is interested in the fortunes of Vladimir Paulpoff, a stalwart Russian blacksmith. She asks Neslerov to use his influence for Vladimir. II.—Neslerov goes to Vladimir's hut. The blacksmith has talent and shows Neslerov a picture he has painted. It is the portrait of a woman of rank copied from a miniature. The prince is excited and asks for the original. Vladimir's father says it has been lost. To Vladimir old Paulpoff confesses that he lied to Neslerov and still has the miniature. III.—Neslerov has the Paulpoffs sent to Siberia as nihilists. IV.—Frances Gordon goes to the forge with books for Vladimir. At the door of the lonely hut she encounters Neslerov. The prince presses his suit violently, and Frances stuns him with a pistol shot in the head. V.—Gordon wishes his daughter to marry Jack Denton, an American bridge engineer. Frances demands that her father intercede with the governor for Vladimir. They start for Ohi. Neslerov boards the same train, which breaks in two, and Neslerov has Frances alone in his power. VI.—Neslerov drags Frances before a priest and bids him to perform a marriage ceremony. Jack Denton comes to the rescue. Neslerov is beaten off. VII.—Denton nearly kills Neslerov in a duel. VIII.—Jack promises Frances to save the blacksmith.

CHAPTER IX.

DENTON TURNS LOCOMOTIVE ENGINEER.

DENTON presented an unruffled front.

"Take me to the governor," he said.

"The governor is resting," growled a fellow whose face was a mass of greasy hair. "You will kill him."

"Nonsense! Take me to the governor. If you kill me, he will die."

"Why is that, builder of bridges? Is there a god who avenges the death of Americans?"

"It will need no god to do that now. The case is simply that Neslerov needs better care than you can give him. He is badly injured. It is necessary that he shall be taken to Tomsk at once. I can start within the hour. There will not be another train to the Ohi in four days. Do you desire to keep your precious governor here and have him die on your hands?"

"No. Let us see what the governor has to say."

It was a solemn crowd that marched in two columns, with Denton between, to the hut of the village priest, where Neslerov lay.

"Why do you bring him here?" asked the priest. "Heard you not what his excellency said?"

"Hold your peace. Wait till you hear them speak together," was the reply.

Neslerov looked up at his conqueror, and an expression of hatred came into his eyes. Denton made no show of sentiment or compassion.

"I understand you commanded these villagers to kill me," he said, standing at the side of the bed and looking coldly and sternly at his victim. "I just wanted to say before they kill me—which they certainly will do if you insist—that in that case you would probably die here for lack of proper care."

"You cannot help me—you would not," answered Neslerov.

"That is for you to say. I am not a murderer. I had no desire to kill you. You attacked me, and I defended myself. I am going back to Tomsk, provided your savage villagers don't kill me, and I merely came to ask if you would be pleased to go."

"How?" he asked.

"In the same car you came thus far in."

"But how? There is no train due for days."

"I will take you to Tomsk if you promise never again to molest Mr. Gordon or his daughter."

"I promise," said Neslerov. "I will order the villagers to permit you to go."

Denton then went to the car and examined it. He discovered where a few in the iron back weakened the

couplings.

He was followed at a short distance by several young men, among whom was the boy who had run to tell him that a woman was being roughly handled by Neslerov, and who had taken his horse to shelter. He ordered the boy to bring the horse. Mounting, he was soon out of sight. He did not go far, however. He rode along the track until he reached a siding a short distance from the bridge, where there was an old construction engine.

Denton examined the old hulk. It was fit only for drawing one or two cars. Denton carried water from the river and filled the boiler and built a fire of wood.

Soon after the villagers were surprised to see a wheezy, rickety old engine coming slowly, with a prodigious noise, into view. Denton's horse had no difficulty in keeping up with it.

The old engine was coupled to the car, and then Denton went for Frances.

"The train is ready," he said.

"The train! What train?"

"The train that is to carry you to the Ohi, where you will join your father."

"But there is no train!"

"There is a train, and as the steam is up and the track clear I suggest haste. Your father is probably anxious."

She went with him. At the sight of the engine she understood.

"You are a wonderful—you are doing this for me!" she said.

"Yes, but Neslerov will be a passenger."

"And you?"

"Engineer, conductor, guard—all."

He took her to the car and made her comfortable.

Neslerov was carried to the car by the villagers. The backs of two seats were turned down, a bed was made for him, and he lay there quiet and seemingly content.

"Of course, I know that you are seriously wounded," said Denton to him, "and the possibility of your doing any mischief is small, but I want to tell you before we start that if I catch you at any tricks I will kill you as I would a dog."

Neslerov nodded, and Denton went on the engine.

It was an exciting start, though the audience was small. The villagers stared, then laughed as the little old engine puffed and screeched and scurried as it got under way.

But it had a man in charge of it who was accustomed to overcoming difficulties. And the way he made it groan and work would have made glad the heart of the man who had abandoned it on the siding six months before.

In the car was silence. Neslerov was too weak to talk; Frances would not talk to him if he wished. She remained at her end of the car, save to go in mercy to him and offer him water at intervals. At such times he would look up at her with an earnest, inscrutable expression on his face. She would not speak, nor he.

Suddenly at a siding toward which he had been aiming Denton turned the engine to the right and brought the little train to a standstill. They had been on the road sixteen hours and had traveled 210 miles.

Frances and Neslerov both looked up as the train stopped and saw the grimy engineer enter the car.

"There is a village near here," he said, "and just beyond this siding there is a small signal box. I have just visited it, and there is a train coming this way from Tomsk. Undoubtedly, as there is no regular train due, this is a searching party out after Frances Gordon. Now, have no wish to start an international controversy. What story shall we tell?"

"Tell the truth," said Frances. "It does not, as a rule, harm any person who is innocent."

"No," said Neslerov; "not as a rule. But we are in a part of the world where customs are different from yours. If you tell the truth, you will never make the world believe you. But you will not understand; I cannot tell you."

"I know what you mean," said Frances scornfully. "You mean that your reputation is so bad that if it were known that you had that car left behind to compel me to marry you everybody will be sure I am your wife. Is that it?"

"Yes; something like that."

"But, then, there is my word," said Denton.

"Your story will be believed by your people, my story by mine," said Neslerov. "Let us each tell what we please. I do not care."

Denton nodded and went back to his engine. But he did not start. The

whistle of a speeding locomotive was borne to him by the breeze. It came—one engine and a car, the same as that he was on, but a modern locomotive of American make. Gordon was in the car with some officials from Tomsk.

"Hey! That you, Denton?" he gasped as the grimy bridgebuilder stepped into the car, which was stopped at the side of the construction engine. "My girl and the governor of Tomsk got left behind in a car. Seen?"

"I'm all right," said Frances as she emerged from her car and flew to her father's arms.

"Did Denton save you? What was it? Where is Neslerov?" asked Gordon. "Oh, he is in there," said Frances coolly. "We've had a lively experience. I thought at one time we'd be killed by some savages. But Mr. Denton and the prince—oh, let's get on; I'm tired out and hungry."

Denton heard and wondered.

In every new experience he had had with Frances Gordon he had been made more and more astonished by the uncertain moods, the whims, the strange turns her caprice would take.

"Hitch on to this train and haul her back to the Ohi," said Denton. "If the road doesn't want this engine, I can use it at the Ohi bridge."

This attachment was soon made, and Mr. Gordon, after visiting the prince and congratulating him upon his escape from the savages, assisted in



At the sight of the engine she understood, transferring to him some of the comforts to be found in the other car. The Russian officials swarmed around him and praised his courage.

"And that American! He is a brave one too!" they said.

"Yes; he is brave—braver than I," said Neslerov weakly.

The train started back toward Tomsk. It had about ninety miles to go to reach the Ohi. During the journey Denton and Frances found themselves side by side in the rear car, with no one near enough to hear their low spoken tones.

"I cannot understand you," said Denton. "You first said tell the truth, then you yourself told the first deliberate lie. Why?"

Frances looked at him coolly. "Because I thought it over. There was a good deal in what Neslerov said. Then, again, you and my father have work to do, a career to make, money to earn, and with the enmity of Neslerov you would be ruined. I studied it well. It is better as I said it. Let it pass."

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"Here we are at Vashlov," he said. "For the time being you are home again."

"Yes," she replied, with the slightest tremor in her voice. "Thanks to you, I am home again—in my temporary home."

CHAPTER X.

JANSKY, SUPERINTENDENT OF POLICE.

NESLEROV lay in his palace in Tomsk, slowly recovering.

His heart was filled with rage, and he longed for vengeance.

His closest confidant now was Jansky, who, owing to his meritorious conduct in the apprehension of a great gang of conspirators as the Paulpoffs, was promoted at the request of Neslerov to a post where he could assist his superior in his plans and ambitions.

He had told Jansky the story of the ride from Moscow, and it was of course colored to suit his purpose. Jansky had received his commission—the first important one since his arrival at Tomsk—to watch the American and find an opportunity to wreak vengeance.

About twenty miles from the city of Tomsk was the village of Tivolofsky, a small mining town peopled by convicts.

To this town the Paulpoffs had been sent. Vladimir was useful in the mines. With his tremendous strength he could do the work of two, and in his simple obedience to the mandates of his superiors he never uttered a complaint. The old people did menial work, cooking for the convicts who had no families or cleaning in the houses of the officers.

This new life came hardest upon the old people, and it was their sufferings that made Vladimir curse under his breath.

One day Jansky entered the room where Neslerov sat or half reclined.

"Well, what is it? I see you have something to say," said Neslerov.

"I have, your excellency," replied the superintendent of police. "It concerns him—your enemy."

"The American?"

"Yes. I have obeyed your commands—he has been constantly watched. And at last we are in a position to strike."

Neslerov sat up straight.

"What? Tell me at once."

"It is not yet revealed what the man's object is, but he and the Paulpoffs are plotting again."

"The Paulpoffs?"

"They and the American. He has visited them twice. It was overheard that he and Papa Paulpoff had a long conversation about a picture."

Neslerov glanced at a painting that hung on the wall. It was the painting he had taken from the Paulpoffs' house at Perm.

"What can he know about the picture?" asked the governor.

"I do not know. That is, as I said, not yet revealed."

"Jansky," he said, "I know what the object is if you do not. Listen carefully now to what I say. It is quite possible the American has discovered the existence of the original of that picture you see there. It is a small medallion, probably in a locket. It was lost some years ago by a member of my family and bears relation to a great mystery—the mystery of Graslov."

Jansky shut his eyes and seemed to be thinking.

"Jansky, your life and mine depend on your action now. Do you understand?"

"I understand nothing."

"That picture, if it is the one I mean,

must be brought to me. The American, if he proves to be interested in it, must know or suspect something I do not wish him to know. There are ways whereby even an American could disappear in Siberia. And Jansky, Vladimir Paulpoff is a most dangerous plotter even here. He ought to be placed where he can do no more mischief."

"I begin to understand," said Jansky grimly.

He bowed and left the palace and rode toward Tivolofsky.

Two days passed, during which Jansky watched and kept himself in readiness to act. Then, while Mamma Paulpoff was alone in her hut, she heard an imperative knocking at the door. Papa Paulpoff and Vladimir had just gone to the mine. Denton, the American, had left the hut but a short time before Mamma Paulpoff had been through so much trouble of late that the slightest sound jarred upon her. She turned whiter still and stepped backward as she saw the dark and forbidding face of Jansky. Behind Jansky were two of the Tomsk police.

"You are Mamma Paulpoff," said Jansky, slipping his foot in the door and working his way inside.

"I am; you know me; I was at Perm," faltered the trembling old woman.

"I am quite well aware that you were at Perm, old woman, and also that conspiring son of yours. It showed the mercy of the czar that you received no worse punishment. This is heaven compared to what you deserved."

"We had done nothing, your excellency."

"What! You still persist in that lie! You were all in the game, and you are still at it, let me tell you."

"It is not so!" cried the old woman, having visions of horrible punishments of which she had heard.

"Don't tell me," said Jansky, brandishing a whip he carried. The other two did the same, but their whips were heavier.

The old woman crouched against the wall.

"Don't lie to me again," thundered Jansky. "I have been watching you every day since you came to this place. I say you are still conspiring."

"It is not so! I swear it in the name of God!" cried Mamma Paulpoff.

"Let me tell you, it will be worse for you if you do not tell the truth. You are receiving a visitor who is suspected."

"I—a visitor! I know no one!" gasped Mamma Paulpoff.

"Oh, do you not? But you were here when he came. Did he come to see you, your husband or your son?"

"Who—of whom do you speak?" asked the frightened old woman.

"Of whom would I speak save that accursed American? He has twice made attempts upon the life of the governor of Tomsk. Yet the governor in the kindness of his heart has not molested him. But he was warned if a third attempt was made it would go hard with him."

"Ah, it is impossible! He is so good—so kind—"

"Good and kind, eh? In what manner does he display it?"

"Oh, he came—he came!"

The old woman stumbled and floundered. It had been borne in upon her understanding by Papa Paulpoff that on no account must she breathe a word to any person concerning the visit of which Jansky spoke.

"Come, out with it!" stormed Jansky.

"He came—I do not know why he came," murmured the old woman in despair.

"I will tell you. He came to conspire against the life of Neslerov, governor of Tomsk."

"No, no! I swear he did not."

"Good! Then if you know he did not, you must know why he did come here. Out with it, now, if you value your life."

"My life! Ah, you would not harm a helpless old woman!"

For answer Jansky brought his whip down on her bony shoulders.

"Have mercy!" cried the unfortunate. "Will you tell why the American visited this house?"

"I know not!"

"Take her, the her thumbs—there, over the door!" he commanded savagely.

His two gallant men needed no further bidding. The aged woman was seized, cords were fastened to her thumbs, and she was placed standing in the doorway Jansky had indicated with her thumbs hung above her head.

"Tear the rags from her back!"

A rude hand tore away her garments to the waist.

"Now, then, old hag," said Jansky, "understand I have come for the truth and will have it. If you do not give it to me, I will kill you. I will give the truth from Paulpoff, who has more sense than you. Now, what was the business that brought the American here?"

"I know not!" whispered the woman, with a great sob.

"The lash!" roared Jansky.

One of his police swung his heavy whip, and the lash came down across the naked shoulders. A livid mark told the course, and Mamma Paulpoff cried out in agony.

"This must be known," said Jansky. "Either you or some one must tell. What brought the American here? Was it concerning a picture?"

"I know not!" said the woman.

"The lash! Twice!" ordered Jansky. A white line and a red one marked the blows of the whip. Mamma Paulpoff screamed in her awful torture. Her limbs grew weaker, and she hung by the cords tied to her thumbs. The thumbs were black.

"You will learn!" said Jansky. "The officers of the czar must take these steps to protect his empire. With the lesson you have had, tell the truth. What brought the American here?"

"I know not!" answered the woman.

"Hell's furies upon her!" said Jansky, almost beside himself. "The lash! Three times!"

"Your arm is weak," said the police officer who had done no whipping. "Let me try."

A smile of horrible cruelty crossed his face as he stepped by the side of the woman. His whip whistled in the air. It fell—once—twice—three, and with a scream, her head fell back. Her eyes glazed.

"Hold! Quick! Release her and restore her to consciousness!" ordered Jansky. "She is unconscious and cannot feel our punishment."

They cut her down, laid her on the floor and poured liquor down her throat.

Groans came from her as they worked.

"God, take me from this awful pain!" she murmured.

"She feels again!" said Jansky in savage glee. "String her up!"

Again she was raised and the cords were fastened to her thumbs.

(Continued on 4th page.)